



UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM
Annual Report 2010



**Annual Report of the
United States Commission on International Religious Freedom**

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Front Cover: URUMQI, China, July 7, 2009 – A Uighur Muslim woman stands courageously before Chinese riot police sent to quell demonstrations by thousands of Uighurs calling for the government to respect their human rights. The Uighurs are a minority Muslim group in the autonomous Xinjiang Uighur region. Chinese government efforts to put down the ethnic and religious protest resulted in more than 150 dead and hundreds of arrests. (Photo by Guang Niu/Getty Images)

Back Cover: JUBA, Southern Sudan, April 10, 2010 – School children participate in a prayer service on the eve of Sudan's first national elections in more than two decades. Those elections are called for under the Comprehensive Peace Agreement between North and South Sudan, the full implementation of which is widely believed to be essential to averting another bloody civil war marked by sectarian strife. Although the elections were deeply flawed, many Southern Sudanese saw them as a necessary milestone on the road to a January 2011 referendum on Southern Sudan's political future--the final major step in the peace agreement. (Photo by Jerome Delay/Associated Press)

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Venezuela

FINDINGS: Violations of freedom of religion or belief continue in Venezuela. These violations include: government rhetoric, and in some cases government actions, against the Jewish and Catholic communities and certain Protestant groups; virulent anti-Semitic statements by President Hugo Chavez, senior government officials, state media, and pro-Chavez media; societal attacks on Jewish and Catholic institutions and Catholic leaders and the Venezuelan government's failure to investigate or hold accountable the perpetrators of these attacks; and the potential negative impact of new laws on religious communities.

Based on these concerns, USCIRF again places Venezuela on its Watch List in 2010. In 2009, the Commission placed Venezuela on its Watch List for the first time.

Since 1998, the country has witnessed a steady increase in government rhetoric, and in some cases government actions, directed against the Venezuelan Jewish and Catholic communities and Protestant groups supported by U.S.-based counterparts. These developments occurred against a backdrop of efforts by President Hugo Chavez to extend his political control over government institutions, the economy, and society; his backtracking on democracy; and the imposition of his state-run programs on "Bolivarian socialist" doctrine. While there are no official restrictions on religious practice, actions by President Chavez and other government officials have created an environment in which Jewish and Catholic religious leaders and institutions are at risk of attack. Furthermore, the Venezuelan government has failed to take adequate measures to bring to justice perpetrators of attacks on Jewish and Catholic religious leaders and institutions.

PRIORITY RECOMMENDATIONS: The U.S. government should increase its efforts to promote freedom of religion or belief in Venezuela, but this must be done in a way so as not to put religious communities in danger, considering the poor state of relations between the two countries and President Chavez's efforts to stand in opposition to the United States. The U.S. government should continue its policy of speaking out against attacks on religious leaders and institutions as they occur. The U.S. government should also work with countries such as Spain and Brazil that may have influence with the Venezuelan government to encourage it to end its anti-Semitic statements; fully investigate attacks on religious communities, institutions, and leaders; and hold perpetrators accountable. Additional recommendations for U.S. policy towards Venezuela can be found at the end of this chapter.

Religious Freedom Conditions

Legal Environment

The Constitution of Venezuela provides for freedom of religion on the condition that its practice does not violate public morality, decency, or public order. Religious groups are required to register with the Directorate of Justice and Religion (DJR) in the Ministry of Interior and Justice, but this is largely an administrative requirement. The DJR provides religious groups with subsidies to conduct educational and social programs, which has historically been distributed to Catholic organizations. Recent years have seen a reduction in subsidies provided to Catholic organizations and the Episcopal Conference of Venezuela, and an increase in funding to evangelical groups implementing government-approved social programs, as well as larger shares of government revenue directed to state-operated social programs.

In the past year, there have been some legislative initiatives that, if implemented, would negatively impact religious communities in Venezuela. The Catholic Church feels particularly threatened by these initiatives, viewing them as punitive measures in the government's effort to silence voices critical of Venezuelan government policies.

In August 2009, the National Assembly passed an education reform bill that if fully implemented would negatively impact religious instruction in Venezuelan private schools. The law creates "communal councils" to supervise and control all public and private schools, including religious schools. These councils, which are to be dominated by the ruling party, will have the authority to determine curriculum, teachers, and school administrators. The law also prohibits the teaching of lessons which run counter to the state's Bolivarian socialist doctrine. Given that the Venezuelan government has severed relations with the state of Israel and frequently denounces Israeli foreign and regional policy, Jewish schools are concerned that this prohibition against certain topics deemed contrary to the Bolivarian doctrine would impact their lessons on Israel and the Jewish people. The law also calls for the promotion of indigenous languages in schools. Jewish institutions are concerned this could negatively impact Hebrew language courses.

The Catholic Church is also concerned that a law passed in 2009 to protect nationally important historic buildings would allow the government to confiscate Church property, including churches, schools, and other ecclesiastical buildings. The Church reports that in Caracas, the local district council leader in October announced plans to seize several church-run schools as part of this initiative.

Finally, the National Assembly is currently working on draft legislation that would increase oversight of all non-governmental organizations, including religious organizations. At the time of this writing, the current draft would reportedly require organizations that receive at least 10 percent of their support from foreign sources to obtain advanced government approval of their activities and funding sources. The legislation would also require such organizations to provide the government with information on their sources of funding, organizational leadership, and activities.

Anti-Semitism

Thousands of Jews have left the country in the 10 years since President Chavez came to power, and the population today is estimated to be between 10,000 and 15,000, down from an estimated 22,000 in 1998. The emigration has resulted in part due to fear of potential negative results of the president's socialist agenda, but more recently because of anti-Semitism and targeting of the Jewish community. Notably, prior to President Chavez's rule, the country was not known to have problems of anti-Semitism; rather it enjoyed a reputation of welcoming Jews during and after the Holocaust. However, increased incidents of

societal anti-Semitism and the increasing rate of verbal attacks on the community by government officials is undermining that legacy and is creating fear of future attacks in the Venezuelan Jewish community.

For many years, President Chavez, government officials, government-controlled media, and President Chavez's supporters have used a variety of methods to intimidate the country's Jewish community. Anti-Semitism in the country has appeared in waves, with upsurges corresponding with important international events or domestic political periods, such as the 2006 Israel-Lebanon conflict and the lead-up to a 2007 national referendum on proposed changes to the Venezuelan constitution. Anti-Semitic rhetoric and acts in Venezuela escalated to a new level at the end of 2008 and in the early months of 2009, corresponding to the Israel-Gaza conflict, fostering a climate permissive of anti-Semitic actions.

President Chavez and other senior government officials' severe criticisms of the state of Israel frequently cross the line to be anti-Semitic, including comparing the actions of Israeli officials to those of Nazis, blaming Israel and Jews for the world's problems, and promoting stereotypes of Jewish financial influence and control. Government media echo anti-Semitic sentiments across the country that can be found in cartoons and opinion pieces, heard on radio programs and in rallies. Anti-Semitic cartoons and graffiti repeatedly have equated the Star of David with a swastika. Often, the actions of the state of Israel are conflated with Venezuelan Jews, who are in turn held responsible for Israel's policies. While reports of anti-Semitism in Venezuela have decreased since February 2009, this pattern suggests that government and societal anti-Semitic statements and actions can target Venezuelan Jews at any time, especially if Israel undertakes policies opposed by the Venezuelan government.

While it is not anti-Semitic to criticize the policies of the state of Israel, such criticism can take on anti-Semitic qualities. Several international organizations in Europe have noted that anti-Semitism can include actions beyond verbal and physical assaults, such as promoting the stereotype that Jews control the media, economy, government and social institutions; questioning the loyalty of Jews to their own nations; comparing Israel's actions to those of Nazis; and holding Jews responsible for Israeli actions.

Such statements and government raids against the Jewish community center La Hebraica in Caracas in 2004 and 2007 led the State Department to list Venezuela as a state sponsor of anti-Semitism in the March 2008 *Contemporary Global Anti-Semitism Report*.

In its February 2010 report documenting human rights violations in Venezuela, the Organization for American States' Inter-American Commission on Human Rights also expressed concern for increasing anti-Semitism and attacks on the Jewish community in Venezuela. The report concludes that the state's actions are "creating an atmosphere of intimidation and violence against the Jewish community in Venezuela," and calls on the Venezuelan government to investigate attacks on the Jewish community and hold perpetrators accountable.

President Chavez continued to make anti-Semitic statements throughout 2009, including comparing the actions of Israel in Gaza to genocide and stating that Israel aims to "terminate the Palestinian people." For example, President Chavez made these statements in Venezuela as well as on state trips to Syria and France in September.

In July and August 2009, President Chavez and pro-Chavez media in Venezuela made several statements in connection with the removal of Honduran President Manuel Zelaya, accusing Israel and Jews of playing a role in the ouster and working with the de facto Honduran president, Robert Micheletti. Many of these statements were perceived as anti-Semitic; some compared the activities in Honduras to Israeli actions in the Middle East, as well as expounded conspiracy theories such as that Israel controlled the UN and Organization of American States.

There were no new violent attacks on Jewish institutions since the Commission's May 2009 annual report. However, there also was no progress in investigating or prosecuting individuals responsible for the attacks on the Tiferet Israel Synagogue and the Beth Shmuel synagogue, which occurred in January and February 2009, respectively.

The Venezuelan Jewish community also is concerned by the increasing diplomatic, military, financial, and trade ties between Iran and Venezuela and the growing relationship between Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and President Chavez. Head of state visits are frequent and joint ventures are estimated to be worth \$20 billion. In April 2008, the two countries signed a Memorandum of Understanding pledging full military support and cooperation. Former Manhattan District Attorney Robert Morgenthau has said that investigations by his office show Iran is using Venezuela's established banking network to skirt international sanctions and acquire the materials needed for its nuclear program and fund terrorist groups. Of particular concern is the fact that direct flights between Caracas and Tehran undergo less stringent security checks than other flights to Caracas. The State Department has warned that these flights may allow Hezbollah agents to enter Venezuela. Hezbollah is cited on the U.S. terrorism list.

Government-Catholic Church Tensions

There are also tensions between the Catholic Church and the Venezuelan government over Catholic leaders' criticism of the government's actions and direction. In response to such criticism, President Chavez has claimed that Venezuela's Catholic Church and the Vatican are conspiring with the United States against his government. On several occasions, he has accused the Church of attempting a coup or being party to plans to assassinate him, and has called Catholic leaders "oligarchs" and "the devil."

As is the case with the Jewish community, the Venezuelan government's posture toward the Catholic Church has been reflected in some societal attacks on Catholic institutions. On several occasions, pro-Chavez supporters have forcefully entered and occupied the residence of Catholic leaders or staged protests outside of their churches to hold a press conference to denounce leaders of the Catholic Church and the Papal Nunciature. No arrests have been made in these incidents. Additionally, no arrests have been made in the January 2009 attack on the house of the Apostolic Nunciature.

In November 2009, in Los Teques, Chavez supporters played loud music outside of the church of a priest critical of the government to drown out his preaching. In August 2009, a similar event took place outside of the church of Cardinal Jose Urosa Savino of Caracas, who has been very critical of the President and helped lead opposition to a new education law. In addition, some priests have been threatened for preaching against Chavez's proposed reforms.

U.S. Policy

U.S.-Venezuelan relations remained poor in 2009, although the two nations returned their ambassadors to their posts in June and July, after recalling them to their respective capitals in 2008. In April 2009, Presidents Obama and Chavez had some brief exchanges at the Fifth Summit of the Americas, but no one-on-one meeting took place. However, the brief encounters drew attention when the Venezuelan president gave President Obama a book describing the European and U.S. "pillaging" of Latin America. Since bilateral relations first deteriorated in 2002, Venezuelan President Chavez has continued to insult the United States and seek relations with nations, including those with numerous dictators and human rights abusers, to stand in opposition to "the Empire."

There are some areas of cooperation between the two nations, principally on trade, and notably oil. The United States is Venezuela's most important trading partner, with approximately 60 percent of Venezuelan exports going to the United States. Venezuela is the United States' third-largest export market in Latin America. Previously, the two nations cooperated extensively to stop narcotics trafficking, but in 2005, the Venezuelan government accused the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration of espionage and ended its cooperation with the agency.

The U.S. government continues to be concerned by President Chavez's efforts to increase his control over state institutions and silence independent and critical voices, including opposition politicians and independent media. U.S. government assistance in Venezuela is relatively small, standing at only \$6 million in fiscal year 2009. There is no USAID presence in the country; programs are carried out by U.S.-based and indigenous non-governmental organizations. U.S. funds support both pro-government and opposition civil society organizations in order to increase dialogue and positive debates between the two sides. Funds to civil society groups support efforts to promote and protect human rights in the country through training in community activism, increase civic engagement, and develop strategies to protect human rights defenders. One-fifth of the funds were devoted to increasing political competition and pluralism in the nation.

The U.S. government routinely meets with religious communities and speaks out against anti-Semitic attacks as they occur. Given the poor state of relations between the two nations, there is little interaction between U.S. Embassy officials and Venezuelan officials, preventing a thorough discussion of freedom of religion or belief between the two nations.

Recommendations

I. Advancing Religious Freedom through U.S. Programs and Policies

The U.S. government should:

- at the highest levels, publicly denounce Venezuelan government rhetoric and raids against, as well as societal attacks on, religious communities, institutions, and leaders, and urge the Venezuelan government to promptly investigate, arrest, vigorously prosecute, and hold to account all perpetrators of such attacks;
- at the highest levels, speak out publicly and continue to draw international attention to state-sponsored anti-Semitism in Venezuela;
- work within the current overall policy framework to ensure that violations of freedom of religion and belief, and related human rights, are included in all bilateral discussions with the Venezuelan government, including economic and energy sector discussions;
- ensure that funding for democracy and human rights promotion in Venezuela includes support for activities advancing freedom of religion or belief; and
- dispatch the Ambassador-at-Large for Religious Freedom and the Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism to Venezuela and report on religious freedom abuses in that country.

II. Advancing Religious Freedom through Multilateral Efforts

The U.S. government should:

- work with countries that may have influence with the Venezuelan government to encourage the government to end its instigation, complicity, promotion of, or acquiescence in anti-Semitic activities taking place in the country, including anti-Semitic statements by government officials and anti-Semitic cartoons and statements in the state media, as well as to fully investigate all reported incidents of anti-Semitism and bring perpetrators to justice;
- work with countries who may have influence with the Venezuelan government to encourage the government to fully investigate attacks on religious communities, institutions, and leaders, and hold perpetrators accountable, including prosecuting those persons arrested for the attack on the Tiferet Israel Synagogue and arresting and prosecuting individuals of La Piedra, the group that took credit for the January 2009 attack on the house of the Apostolic Nunciature;
- work with the Organization of American States, including the OAS General Assembly and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, to investigate and condemn religious freedom violations in Venezuela, including state-sponsored anti-Semitism and attacks on religious communities, institutions, and leaders;
- encourage the UN Special Rapporteur on the Freedom of Religion or Belief and the UN Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of the Right to Freedom of Expression to request a visit to the country; and
- support a UN General Assembly resolution condemning severe violations of human rights, including freedom of religion or belief, in Venezuela, and calling for impartial and effective investigations and for officials responsible for such violations to be held accountable.